

Some Agricultural Practices of the 30s

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CORN DETASSELING

During the summer of my junior year in high school, Dekalb Hybrid started producing hybrid corn on farms around Capron, IL. The company sold their first hybrid corn in 1934, but it wasn't planted locally until 1938 or 1939. In order to obtain the desired seed, it was necessary to remove the tassels (containers of pollen) from the corn plants so that they couldn't self-pollinate. After removal of the tassels, workers from Dekalb Hybrid would pollinate the corn with the desired strain of corn pollen. When the word went out that they were paying 25 cents per hour for detasseling, many of the local high school kids signed up. In the morning about sunrise a truck would pick us up at a designated place in town and take us to the farm where we would work that day.

We walked between two rows of corn, reached up and pulled tassels on both sides of the row. This was before Dekalb Hybrid used trucks for workers to ride on while



pulling the tassels. Early in the morning before the sun was high it was relatively pleasant as far as temperature was concerned, but the dew from the plants got us wet in a hurry. Also, the leaves would produce scratches on our arms and necks, which, while not deep did smart as the sun got higher and sweat got into them. About 10:00 am the sun was high enough to make it uncomfortably hot. The heat, scratches, sweat and insects made the job a lot more unpleasant than just pulling tassels. By the end of the day, which was about 10 hours, our arms felt like lead, because most of us were shorter than the plants and had to reach up for the tassels. Many of the kids dropped out after a day or two, but for two or two and a half-dollars a day my buddies and I stuck with the job. It lasted two to three weeks due to the staggered plantings arranged by the company. At the time, I didn't realize that I was involved in the pioneering work in corn hybrid. I did know that the farmers who used the hybrid seed got as much as 100 bushels of corn per acre compared to the 40 bushels they used to get. I also didn't understand the reason that the farmers didn't just harvest their hybrid corn and use it for seed the following year. Now I realize that a hybrid doesn't breed true, and so it must be produced each year. At the time I was only interested in the fact that somebody was willing to pay a high hourly rate to have us pull off parts of their corn plants.

THISTLES AIN'T ALL BAD

Sometime around 1938 or 1939 the State of Illinois passed a regulation that all farmers had to eradicate all Canada thistle from their property. I didn't know the reason behind this regulation; perhaps it was to reduce the amount of thistle seed in the seed of the crop plants since the thistle plants were harvested with the other crops. Whatever the reason, the removal of thistle plants had to be done by a man and his hoe, if the farmer wanted to preserve as much as possible of his seed plants. Consequently, farmers hired town folks for 25 cents an hour to get the job done. My cousin Louie got hired and after working one day told the farmer that his cousin would like to work. A work day started at 7:00am and ended at 5:00pm with an hour off for lunch, which the farmer, actually his wife, provided. On my first day my cousin and I arrived at the farm, each with our own hoe and a metal file to keep the hoe sharp. At 12:00 noon we gathered in the farm house for dinner. There were eight of us around the table, seven men and me. The farmer's wife and daughter waited on the table making sure no one's plate was empty. The meal was chicken, mashed potatoes, several vegetables, bread, milk and coffee. I liked all these items but felt uncomfortable being seated and eating while the women were standing and not eating. I had been taught that women were seated first and ate with the men. I didn't enjoy this situation nor did I eat very much, a fact I came to regret before 5:00pm. On the way home Louie asked me why I hadn't eaten much. I told him of my feelings, and he explained that this was the way farmers handled a meal for a work crew. He also reminded me that I would get rather hungry on this job if I didn't join in with the rest of the men; I was the only teenager working on this farm. The next day my hunger overcame my uncomfortableness, and I enjoyed the ample meals they served. When it came time to settle up, the farmer gave Louie 25 cents per hour and was going to pay me only 15 cents an hour because I wasn't a full grown man. Louie objected saying I had hoed as many thistles as any of the men and, therefore, deserved full pay. The farmer relented, and I did get my 25 cents an hour. I don't remember hoeing thistles any of the following year; it may have been because a herbicide spray had been developed which was faster and cheaper than man hours, but having received \$6.75 for three days work, I've always had a soft spot for the Canada thistle and my assertive cousin Louie.